
***Managing Strategically in New South
Wales Local Government***

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Doctor of Philosophy in Management

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CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Candidate

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the strategic capacity of local government councils in New South Wales, Australia following the reforms of 1993. Strategic capacity is the unit of analysis for this research and the term is intended to capture the various factors that have enabled or constrained councils in becoming strategic; that is transitioning from a narrow function characterised by property related services, to the broader and legislatively mandated community building role.

On analysis it is clear that a range of factors operates to constrain the development of strategic capacity. However despite this constellation of factors some councils have successfully developed strategic capacity. This seemingly paradoxical situation is the research focus of this thesis. The importance of this research arises from the need for local government to re-evaluate its traditional property services role and consider also providing for the human, social and environmental needs of the community.

Three avenues of investigation constitute this thesis. They are a review and analysis of the relevant theory and practice literature followed by empirical research. The approach is primarily theory building, partly because of the limited empirical research in relation to the sector generally in Australia, and partly because local government is a unique tier of government warranting special consideration when it comes to joining public administration and strategic management.

The empirical research takes a qualitative approach and was based upon an examination of four case study local councils undertaken during 2004 and 2005. The main research tool was the semi- structured interview. The data analysis was based on the technique of meaning condensation in which the transcribed interview

text was reviewed and natural meaning units relevant to the research questions were identified.

Three research questions were sought to be answered by the project: what factors influence the development of strategic capacity, how do these factors operate, can these factors be deliberately influenced by organisational or regulatory actors to facilitate the development of strategic capacity?

The research identified a number of factors, some already represented in the literature and others that are new. It is argued that in terms of influencing the development of strategic capacity, many of the factors from all three avenues of investigation suggest certain structural, managerial and practice barriers to the development of strategic capacity. These include weak strategic leadership arrangements, a need for stronger ideals of 'place' in strategic decision-making and a more informed and active deliberative process centred on elected representatives and their role in determining strategy. Without these changes, legislative reforms will only treat symptoms and strategic capacity will be slow in developing.